

Beware of Materials that Tell You: “Visualise” and “Actualise”

A piece of writing is appearing among some Christian circles called “The Journey.” It is similar to a good deal that is said in counselling and in motivational courses that businesses get their employees to attend these days. When read quickly, many people would see it as a nice piece of devotional encouragement. It reads:

“Inner Strength is the key to endure the trials which confront you today. Unconsciously your victories defeat many but know this: You have a beauty and honesty which surpasses those around you and belittle you. Escape by visualising the future in your dreams, reality is sure to be inspired by the power of your desires. You are powerful, you can dream the world is for you because it is exactly that: your world. Tomorrow can seem so far away and yet it will be before you all too soon. Embrace the future, embrace your fears and sorrow and claim them, for no one else can hurt you if the pain is your possession. Take the many gifts you have, protect them and take pride in whom they have created, you. Nourish your soul, fulfil your desires passionately and with your heart open allow your spirituality to fly, only then will freedom come to you.”

A brief look should tell Christians that it is full of New Age ideas.

It begins: “*Inner strength is the key to endure the trials which confront you today.*” Does the Bible tell people to look inside themselves for “inner strength”? If we take the Bible teaching of original sin seriously, we know that our human natures are sinful, not because sin is part of human nature, but because since the fall into sin our human natures are totally corrupted by sin, lacking fear and trust in God, and hostile to God. It follows that looking inside ourselves for inner strength is anti-God, and seeking to rely on our own fallen, sinful natures. God is our strength, our Rock, as the Psalms often say, and He is outside ourselves.

People who talk about inner strength in this way do not mean, as Christians do, that Christ is in them, and they are in Christ. Paul said, “*I can do everything through Him who strengthens me*” (Ph 4:13). The most important thing for Christians is that God, outside of themselves, is for them (justification). The God who is for them is also in them (sanctification). If there is any “*inner strength*”, it comes from Him, His grace, and His power, through His Word.

New Age principles encourage people to think that they themselves have an affinity with what is divine. All they have to do is visualise this, and actualise this. Alongside this there is the notion that evil is only a figment of the imagination. People just have to convince themselves that what they want and do is perfectly right, and get rid of their hang-ups about evil. Really, this is Satan’s modern revision of two statements to Eve in the Garden of Eden: “*You will be like God*”, and “*knowing good and evil.*” Eve, before the fall, should have answered, “*We are like God, made in His image, righteous, holy, and happy to be in communion with God. He has not deprived us of that.*” Of course, God knows good, and He knows about evil, but He does not “*know evil*” in the sense of experience it, or equate evil with good. Self-visualisation and self actualisation are tricks of Satan, almost as old as the world itself.

Another part of the piece says, “*You have a beauty and honesty which surpasses those around you and belittle you. Escape by visualising the future in your dreams, reality is sure to be inspired by the power of your desires. You are powerful, you can dream the world is for you because it is exactly that. Your world.*” The document makes no reference to God. The assumption is that we have holiness and beauty lurking underneath, just waiting to be discovered and put into practice to make all our dreams come true expresses these New Age ideas. This world belongs to God. As far as the world is estranged from God, Christians are in the world, but not of it. Our real future with God is in the age to come, the real new age. We have a part in it through confession of our sin and faith in God the Son, who took on our human nature to deal with our problem right where it is. Because of everything He has done in His incarnate life, suffering, death, and resurrection (Second Article), we share with Him in a great deal of what He is (as children of God, heirs of eternal life, and those who will sit with Him in heaven: Third Article).

The document continues: “*Tomorrow can seem so far away and yet it will be before you all too soon. Embrace the future, embrace your fears and sorrow and claim them, for no one else can hurt you if the pain is your possession. Take the many gifts you have, protect them and take pride in whom they have created, you.*” For this writer, “*future*” means only future in this present world, and if the writer presupposes reincarnation, in more lives in an ongoing round in this present fallen world. This too is a reformulation of Satan’s words to Eve, “*You will certainly not die!*” This document wants to present suffering and sorrow as things a person must affirm, embrace, and claim. It fails to present these as consequences of sin. Pain and death were not in God’s perfect creation. We may accept the fact that we live with pain, but we see it as unnatural, and something that will be eliminated in God’s new heaven and new earth. The pain of this present world is due to the futility to which God has subjected human kind and all the rest of creation that they were designed to rule after the fall (R 8:18-25). The thinking in “*The Journey*” has no room for St Paul’s sentence, “*The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life, in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” Eternal life, which may at times seem far away for the suffering Christian, comes through God’s promise alone, not through false human pride.

It is a fact that many people lack self-confidence. So, is love of self, acceptance of self, some kind of goal to be achieved? Christians are commanded to love their neighbours as (they love) themselves. The words in brackets that are supplied in this comparison are not a command, but a fact. Everyone by nature wants love, joy, peace, and freedom from harm of all kinds. Love of self does not extend to love of what is sinful in ourselves, through that “*other law, which is waging war against the Law of our minds, and making us prisoners to the law of sin that is in the members of our bodies*” (R 7:23).

The same kind of fallacy permeates the last sentence of this short statement: “*Nourish your soul, fulfil your desires passionately and with your heart open allow your spirituality to fly, only then will freedom come to you.*” Nourishment for our

souls comes by way of reception, not by accepting, and not by resolving and doing. It is receiving God's gracious promises, by hearing them, and by being washed by the renewing water of baptism, and by eating and drinking Jesus Christ's body and blood, which link us to Him and to His mystical body. "*Fulfil your desires passionately*" is directly contrary to Paul's admonition: "*Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not be concerned to gratify the desires of the sinful nature*" (R 13:14). An encouragement to open ourselves to spirituality of any sort is one that the Devil welcomes. There are two kinds of spirituality, from above and from below. When restraints are off, the door is open for evil spirits to enter. Think of Jesus' parable about the empty house: "*Then it goes and takes with itself seven other spirits more wicked than itself and they go in and live there. Then the final condition of that person is worse than the first*" (Mt 12:45).

Freedom is not absence of restraint. Our freedom to act is limited by harm to ourselves and to others. It involves responsibility. Christian freedom is a paradox. Paul, who proclaims freedom from the Law through Christ's fulfilment of it for us, can in the same writing call himself a slave of Jesus Christ. People are slaves who serve either righteousness or unrighteousness. Being slaves of sin means being free from righteousness. Now that we have been set free from sin through Christ, we are slaves of righteousness (Rom 6:15-23). Luther expressed part of this paradox in one of his great Reformation writings in 1520, "*The freedom of the Christian man.*" A Christian man is free lord of all things and subject to no one. A Christian man is a bond slave of all and subject to everyone.